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ABSTRACT

After the passage of a resolution by the South Dakota Board of Regents to place greater emphasis on the study of foreign language, Northern State College introduced commercial video programs in Spanish for classroom use. After installing a parabolic antenna and the other necessary equipment, the department selected and edited a series of programs, restructuring them into teaching modules. The programs chosen were of three types: cultural and information programs, entertainment programs, and commercial advertisements. The presentation of the video lessons followed the following pattern: (1) Faculty preparation of a written version of the program content for distribution and students' reading before and after viewing the segment; (2) provision of a set of exercises in various formats (true-false statements, multiple-choice questions, tense identification, idiom identification, general questions, oral and written content summaries, and translations); (3) provision of time for work on troublesome sentence structures; and (4) allowing time for students to record their own versions of a particular segment. Some of the benefits of this approach have been that students began to view Hispanic people as more like themselves as they became familiar with a variety of characters from different segments of society as shown in the video programs. With the variety of characters came a diversity of voice types and an increase in exposure to nonverbal communication. This technique puts language into action, brings the target culture to the students, and attracts and maintains student attention. (MSE)

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COMMERCIAL VIDEO PROGRAMS: A COMPONENT TO ENHANCE LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Commercial Video Programs: A Component to Enhance Language Skills

Introduction

Some of the recent national reports on education have indicated the existence of a "scandalous" state of foreign language study and international education in the United States. Since these reports came to light, numerous state task forces have been organized to examine the problems on a state basis and to make recommendations. As a result of these efforts, the trend is now one in which the reinstatement of foreign language requirements is a primary goal. On the negative side, there is evidence that the traditional methods of teaching foreign languages have not produced the expected and necessary results. At the present time, then, we find ourselves, on the one hand, promoting the study of foreign languages but, on the other hand, not having the appropriate approaches in the current methodologies to produce effective and acceptable language skills.

As far back as 1970 there was evidence that demonstrated that one of the major methodologies, the Audio-Lingual Approach, was no better than previous ones and that the new shiny laboratories that accompanied the technique had no measurable effect on language proficiency. As a result, there exists now an intense effort on the part of many to search

for new and innovative teaching techniques that will restructure the traditional methods in which languages have been taught in this country.

Research is now underway to examine the efficiency of video materials produced by new technologies in the teaching of foreign languages. A sophisticated version of this approach is the integration of video lessons with microcomputer programs.

When the Board of Regents of the State of South Dakota passed a resolution to place a greater emphasis on the study of foreign languages, it was decided to look for a different and more innovative approach to be used in correlation with the methods that were currently in use in our language program. At first, we began to use micro-computers. However, it was quickly discovered that while this approach had some positive qualities, it was also not producing the results that were anticipated. It did not have that particular quality that would attract the students and keep them coming back for additional practice.

At that point, the decision was made to look in a different direction for an approach that would provide more visual information and more exposure to the target language. The result was the acquisition of a parabolic antenna and all the other necessary equipment.

Procedure and Implementation of the Project

The first order of business was to select and edit a series of programs that were appropriate for classroom use in terms of content, cultural contributions, level of difficulty, motivational capacity, and a diversity of material.

The programs selected usually fell into three categories: (1) cultural/information type, (2) entertainment, and (3) commercial adver-

tisements. Of the three categories, the entertainment type of programming became the most popular. This material was more frequently used in the project. The next most popular category was the commercial advertisements.

Once the materials had been collected, the next step was to restructure the programs into teaching regiments or modules. The material was organized into small video segments and excercises to give the students the necessary practice in learning the material.

The presentation of the video lessons in the classroom followed the following pattern:

1. Preparation of a written version of the content of the program. In some cases, this part was optional depending on the difficulty of the material and the amount of time available to the instructor. Furthermore, the script could precede the viewing of the program or could be distributed to the students after they had the opportunity to see the video segment once or several times.

2. The distribution of a set of excercises to provide the student with a sense of orientation and a focus on the items to be learned.

3. The set of excercises was usually divided into parts of different formats: true-false statements, multiple choice questions, identification of tenses, identification of idiomatic expressions, general questions, written summaries of content, oral summaries of content, translations, etc. The goal was to divide the whole segment into small sections that would lead the student, one step at a time, to the learning of the entire segment.

4. Whenever troublesome expressions or sentence structures were

encountered, additional time was spent on them through written exercises or through the use of audio tapes for more listening practice.

5. Certain periods of time were allowed for the students to record their version on tape and then the original video version was played, without the sound track, in conjunction with the students' voices.

It should be noted that the procedure just indicated here is a general one and one that can be varied depending on the teaching style of the instructor.

Partial Results of the Project

One of the first benefits of the new approach made itself clear in the early stages of its implementation. It was in the area of the target culture. The students now had the opportunity to view certain cultural items that were not available to them in the textbook. For example, the students' misconceptions of Hispanic people were quickly shattered. Now they could see, that the characters they were viewing were not too different from themselves as they previously had expected. The characters they saw dressed in familiar fashion and they moved and behaved in a similar manner as do people of the United States. Furthermore, the students quickly realized that not all Hispanic persons are of the same skin color. They came to accept the fact that blond, blue-eyed persons do live in Hispanic countries and that they are able to speak Spanish with native abilities.

In addition, the characters with which the students became familiar were no longer entities of abstraction to which they could not relate.

They were now persons who were alive, full of emotions and endowed with a personality. The number of persons that were viewed was not limited to three or four as found in the dialogues of the textbook. Now the student could become familiar with a variety of characters that represented different segments of society.

With the variety of characters also came a diversity of voices. Typically, language students are exposed to a low number of voices in the classroom. Even with additional laboratory work, the total number which the students will hear is still very limited. With the addition of video programming the number of voices is considerably expanded.

One major difference in this area, for example, is found in the unique sounds produced in children's speech. Generally, the characters in textbooks are not children and even in the very few cases in which they are found, the student cannot distinguish their manner of speech from that of adult characters.

Another difference in the audio aspect became apparent in the female voices. Although students may be aware and may be familiar with the uniqueness of the female voice in the target language, in video programming the diversity is greater. This new exposure to a variety of voices became a crucial factor of great benefit in the enhancement of the student's listening abilitites.

The new variety of characters also provided a new set of gestures and movements that were totally non-existent in the textbook. One weakness in the traditional manner of teaching foreign languages in the classroom is the lack of presentation of non-verbal communication.

Traditionally, the non-verbal elements of communication have been greatly underused and underestimated in the typical foreign language classroom.

One major advantage that video programming has over the textbook dialogues is the body language that becomes quite evident in the actions of the characters. Obviously, body language has some universal similarities to which students can relate. However, there are also many differences with which the student is not familiar. The most important factor in this area was not necessarily the similarities nor the differences but the fact that the students were exposed to the target language in motion. There were some cases in which the student was unable to fully comprehend every word of a sentence, or even sentences, but he was able to capture the full context of the situation with the aid of gestures and movements.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the use of commercial television programs may not be the panecea to the problems in foreign language teaching, it does provide certain advantages and benefits that have been lacking in the typical language classroom in which the textbook is the primary source of learning. This new technology mentioned has the tremendous advantage of putting language into motion. With this technique, the student no longer has to accept nor tolerate static figures without personalities and emotions.

Furthermore, video programming can bring the target culture to the student. This is of crucial importance when one considers the fact that a majority of language students do not travel abroad. In addition, the linguistic patterns in the video programs are more varied and complex than those found in textbooks. These patterns are more realistic and, in many cases, also more current than those introduced by a text.

Finally, one cannot underestimate the motivational factor involved in this approach. The content of video programming has the potential of attracting and maintaining student attention for a longer periods of time. The students become more interested in the material to be studied and, consequently, spend more time practicing the language. With a creative instructor, it can become a powerful component that can definitely enhance students' foreign language skills.

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